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## Commemorating economic crisis at a liminal site: Memory, creativity and dissent at Achill Henge, Ireland

### Abstract

This paper draws on a case study of Achill Henge, Co. Mayo, Ireland, to examine the interplay between economic crisis, rebel creativity, and shifting geographies of commemoration. Built in 2011 in a remote part of the west of Ireland, Achill Henge is a highly contested monument. Unfinished and under perennial threat of demolition, the Stonehenge-like structure was originally conceived as a ‘tomb of the Celtic Tiger’ in reference to Ireland’s ill-fated economic ‘miracle’ of the 1990s and 2000s. The paper examines this economic context before adopting two perspectives. Firstly, drawing on critical ideas about commemoration, we identify how the Henge uniquely remembers economic and political failure, materialising a unique site of subaltern memory. Situating it within memorial landscapes in Ireland, we explore how it can serve to critically analyse practices of traditional and contemporary commemoration. Secondly, we examine how its unsanctioned liminality produces a valuable, exemplary site at which numerous, unregulated playful, performative and political practices can be carried out, away from mainstream convention and commercial banality.

### Keywords

Commemoration, Memorial, Creativity, Economic Crisis, Ireland, Celtic Tiger

### Introduction

At the end of November 2011, the inhabitants of the adjoining coastal villages of Keel and Pollagh on Achill Island in County Mayo, Ireland, became aware that an extraordinary structure had been erected on peat bog a few hundred metres to their north. Achill Henge – four metres high, comprised of 30 concrete columns, and with a circumference of nearly 100 metres – had been assembled on Ireland’s Atlantic coast in less than three days. Built in protest against the handling of the 2008 Irish economic crisis, and without any planning permission, the controversial monument remains unfinished and under court order to be demolished.

The Henge is reached via a rough laneway, unpassable to vehicles after a certain point. The final 500-metre stretch must be traversed on foot, with the concrete structure eventually looming into view. It dominates this desolate, elevated spot; its silhouette stands out in the landscape, accentuating its massive circular form, a symmetrical, geometrically exact version of the ancient megaliths which it mimics. The monument's immensity belies how its clandestine construction involved only a handful of people. Given its scale, solidity, and remote location, this was a prodigious feat of labour, construction, and organisation. A mysterious convoy of trucks had travelled three hours north from a pre-cast concrete manufacturing facility near Galway City to deliver the Henge's components. Few locals had any idea about what was being built – rumours abounded that improved sewage facilities, agricultural buildings, wind turbines or an incinerator were being constructed – and Mayo County Council, the local authority, quickly became alerted to the scheme.

While its builder – Joe McNamara, a bankrupt property developer who had grown up on Achill – had envisioned the further installation of a centrepiece, work was prematurely halted on the third evening by court injunction, leaving a completed outer circle and a partial interior ring of concrete footings. A flurry of national and international news coverage followed, with McNamara eventually jailed for several days for violating court orders to demolish the Henge. McNamara, however, argued that the monument should be exempt from planning permission, being both an 'ornamental garden' and built on commonage land – collectively owned property to which his family is a party.

This paper approaches Achill Henge from two key perspectives: Firstly, we focus on its significance as a critical and unique memorial amidst a 'democratisation of memory' through which official forms of commemoration are being supplanted by multiple, more open-ended forms. Ireland's economic crash and its political and economic mismanagement serve as a peculiar subject for a memorial but, we argue, this offers a vantage point from which to critique traditional and contemporary commemorative practices. Accordingly, we consider the structure within the context of the complex memoryscape of Ireland in general and Mayo in particular.

Secondly, we examine the implications for how affective, sensory, creative, political, and convivial practices can be carried out here. The Henge stands as a remarkably unpoliced site of 'rebel creativity', defined by Demos (2016: 87) as combining 'disobedient energies directed against conventional and unjust governance' with 'the inventive aesthetics – visual and objective, theatrical and affective, bodily and intersubjective – of joyful activism.' We explore how such playful and creative practices may occur without hindrance at the Henge and how the value of unsanctioned, unsurveilled, and marginal cultural spaces lies in their potential for staging forms of prefigurative politics.

Before undertaking these empirical and analytical discussions, we examine the contentious cultural and economic context that fuelled the creation of the Henge, the rise and decline of the economic 'miracle' of Celtic Tiger Ireland, and provide an account of the study's methodology.

## Achill Henge: Economic Context

While Achill Henge's prime architect remained quiet, sources close to him affirmed its symbolic purpose as the 'tomb of the Celtic Tiger' (McGreal, 2011b), a memorial space for reflection on the collapse of the Irish economic 'miracle'. 'In its disrespect for the law and the environment', the 'boom tomb', as Mahoney (2012: n.p.) describes it, 'embodies the spirit of feckless development that has crippled Ireland'. Uniquely, although the Henge was conceived to challenge hegemonic political and economic rationalities, it was built by a property developer who had been at the heart of the very speculative rationality which it critiques. It problematises both the destructive (dis)ordering of space that resulted, and austerity-led political responses to the crisis which sought 'to protect as much as possible the interests of the developer and financial class' (O'Callaghan, 2016: 26). In particular, substantial public opposition arose to the social impacts of the Economic Adjustment Programme for Ireland, the bailout led by the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund).

While Ireland's formal national economy began the 20<sup>th</sup> century as effectively a colonial 'granary' for the British empire, it ended it by playing host to European headquarters for global corporations such as Intel, Microsoft, Oracle, Compaq, and Dell (Battel, 2003). Throughout the 1990s, Irish economic growth was four times the European average, occasionally hitting double digits (Daly, 2016), with the Celtic Tiger having two key drivers: attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) based on low corporate tax rates, and subsequently, as FDI-led development reached its apogee, a speculation-led property bubble.

This economic transition is particularly salient to the creation of Achill Henge. After an economic slowdown around 2001, the Irish economy bounced back to spectacular growth by diverting cheap credit into the property market. This approach was sanctioned by the government's National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in 2002; a document which emphasised a "'growth-first" approach to urban development...[facilitating] intense capital switching into property development in order to maintain conditions of high economic growth' (Daly, 2016: 1644). Despite tokenistic nods to 'sustainable development', the planning governance apparatus was oriented around an economically, socially, and environmentally unsustainable growth imperative. Any dissenting voices that articulated caution or alternative socio-spatial futures were ignored, co-opted, or marginalised.

The new approach appeared remarkably successful. As Kitchin et al. (2012: 1302) recall, 'Politicians, policy makers, economists, academics, practitioners, think-tank gurus, and journalists from around the world flocked to Ireland to be inducted in the art of best practice in fast-track growth'. Ultimately, however, the property market driving this miracle had decoupled entirely from social need. Average property resale prices across the country rose by around 500%, with the housing stock growing by 834,596 units between 1991 and 2011 (Kitchin et al., 2014). Speculative practices permeated society; many households invested in the booming property market, buying second, third or more homes, with 100% mortgages seen in the Irish credit market for the first time (O'Callaghan, 2016). Mortgage debt quickly trebled and Irish land was nearly twice the price per hectare of any other European country (Kitchin et al., 2012). That such developments were widely deemed

unproblematic reflected a number of cultural and political particularities. These include the strong national importance placed on home ownership, endemic political clientelism and corruption, and long-standing domination of the political system by centre-right parties for whom the expansion of neoliberal capitalism was seen as a common-sensical, non-ideological matter.

The eventual implosion of this property bubble was symbolised by Ireland's 'ghost estates': property developments with low or zero occupancy rates, unfinished and often lacking basic infrastructure. In October 2011, there were 2,846 instances of these abandoned projects across every Irish county, many in rural areas. Kitchin et al. (2014: 1071) refer to these as 'new ruins', for 'they constitute a form of ruination different from traditional ruins; whereas in the latter capital has extracted value and moved on to a new spatial fix, in unfinished estates investment capital has melted into air before value can be extracted'. While the building site had become a reassuring 'part of a national landscape aesthetic' during the Celtic Tiger (O'Callaghan, 2016: 22), the material imprint of crisis now lay scattered across the Irish landscape.

This ruinous scenario, and the unrest which followed political mismanagement and policies widely perceived as unjust (highlighted in protests like 2010's *Spectacle of Defiance & Hope*), provides the context for the brutalism of Achill Henge. McNamara had previously come to national prominence for two protest actions in Dublin following his foreclosure and bankruptcy. The first entailed driving a cement truck into the gates of the *Dáil*, Ireland's national parliament, in September 2010. The words 'Anglo Toxic Bank' were painted on the truck in reference to Anglo Irish Bank, which had played a key role in the Irish economic bubble and to which the developer reportedly owed €3.5 million (McGreal, 2011a). The protest was accompanied by a banner reading 'The people have had enough. All politicians have been sacked with immediate effect. Power to the people.' The second incident, three months later, involved parking a cherry picker outside the parliament building, again adorned with political slogans blaming the inequitable fallout of the economic crisis on the actions of the banks and a corrupt political elite (Nee, 2010). These two high-profile protests – resulting in the national media bestowing the title of the 'Anglo Avenger' upon McNamara – signify the activist disposition of the memorial's creator and the wider economic and political turmoil that followed the demise of Ireland's famed 'economic miracle'.

### Methodology

This study takes a broadly qualitative approach, acknowledging that 'extra-representational' elements such as the role of practice, embodiment, and site-based performativity has long informed methodological developments in qualitative research within human geography (Vannini, 2015). The scholarly 'witnessing' (Lorimer, 2005: 86) of such a complex memorial calls for the simultaneous use of complementary methods to approach both the site and the multiple practices and interpretations of those utilising it (Ashley, 2016).

Extensive background textual readings, analysis of media reports, and social media postings gave initial insight into diverse visual and narrative responses towards the monument. The study draws primarily, however, from participant observation undertaken in November, 2018. This involved site visits at various times of day and weather conditions, complemented with nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants and

further spontaneous field interviews. Follow-up written communications made with relevant parties unavailable during fieldwork are also drawn upon. Given the combination of a small, close-knit island population and a legally controversial monument, snowball recruitment of participants was undertaken to sensitively facilitate access to individuals who over the previous seven years had been more-or-less closely involved with the Henge and its ensuing controversies.

### Situating Achill Henge in Ireland's Memorial Landscape

In designing a stark concrete form to memorialise the hubristic ambitions of politicians and bankers, the 'Tomb of the Celtic Tiger' contrasts sharply with forms of officially sanctioned and top-down commemoration in Ireland and further afield. Such memorials normally affirm the chosen political and historical narratives of the liberal state (Nora, 1989), conforming to the prescriptive 'authorized heritage discourse' identified by Smith (2006), not to mention various commercial imperatives, including an accelerating concern with attracting tourists, (explored below; also see Robertson, 2012, 2016; Waterton and Smith, 2010; and Johnson, 1999, for a specific examination of this process in Ireland). Memorials are thus devices through which 'groups can gain visibility, authority and legitimacy' (Marschall, 2009: 2), serve as 'points of physical and ideological orientation' (Johnson, 1995: 63) and seek to produce an enduring 'spatial fix' (Maddrell, 2009).

Achill Henge implicitly critiques both traditional and contemporary forms of memorialisation, and thus belongs to a broader process through which official and authorised forms of commemoration are becoming decentred. This more comfortably fits into the broad category of 'heritage from below', concerning the formation of vernacular and subaltern discourses and the consequent production of a memorial 'polyvocality' (Robertson, 2012: 5). Commemorating a far more diverse range of events, people and processes, such monuments are fashioned in an enormous variety of styles and designs that veer away from the figurative sculpture and the sober war memorial.

Achill Henge's location in Ireland's economic geography is telling; facing peripherality and rapid depopulation, Achill stands in stark contrast to the easterly politico-economic powerhouse of Dublin. This is underscored by comparison with the monument most characteristic of the optimism of the Celtic Tiger era: Dublin's *Spire*. The *Spire* is the city's most prominent public installation, an imposing 120-metre-high LED-illuminated stainless-steel spike, commissioned by the City Council. It was built at the height of the Celtic Tiger, in 2003, as a gleaming symbol of progress, urban regeneration, and economic growth. Criticised for being alien from its surroundings – 'from every angle, in material, size, shape and symbolism' (Garvey, 1999) – the structure cost €4.8 million, contrasting with Achill Henge's construction, built at no cost to the state. While the *Spire* is an official celebration of growth, the Henge, uniquely materialising protest in a peripheral landscape, critiquing the shaky economic policies on which this was based.

Rebuking hubristic visions of official memorialisation, the Henge chimes with recent tendencies to counter long-established, dominant conventions of material commemoration. Though groups have always competed to construct material reminders of revered figures and events (Sumartojo, 2018), the built environment is replete with evidence that the

powerful are most able to impose their memorials on space. In this regard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a proliferation of memorials that commemorated industrialists, philanthropists, statesmen, and military heroes, 'great men' typically accompanied in the British Empire by the obligatory female, Queen Victoria. These commemorative intrusions impart ideological and political meanings (Crownshaw, 2014), with a plethora of these stone and bronze figures continuing to linger in squares, parks, and streets. These previously dominant forms of commemoration were subsequently supplemented by monuments to military victories and tragedies. For instance, communities and politicians responded to the trauma and collective loss of the First World War with numerous memorials, from local shrines to large national monuments around which 'rituals, festivals, pageants, public dramas and civic ceremonies' were staged (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004: 350). In Mayo, the most prominent of such memorial sites is Castlebar's Mayo Peace Park, commemorating those killed in the two world wars and other 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts.

Though these war memorials continue to reverberate with potent meaning, the earlier figurative memorials are more enigmatic, expressing social, political, and symbolic meanings often impervious to contemporary understandings. Despite this, their durable materiality and affective power has ensured that they often endure. Retaining the regard of planners, conservationists and heritage professionals, they are frequently assigned listed status. Accordingly, in most settings, these statues rarely suffer the indignity of destruction; this typically only occurs when they symbolise a historical event now deemed politically unacceptable or embody discredited regimes or persons. Current examples include the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign that calls for the removal of statues of the colonial icon, Cecil Rhodes, from the Universities of Cape Town and Oxford. However, in Ireland, controversies over the destruction and removal of commemorative statues and memorials are nothing new.

From the eighteenth century, statues of British figures installed as signifiers of colonial rule, inscribing Dublin 'as a provincial capital within a Union whose centre was London' (Johnson, 1995: 59), were attacked during the nationalist struggle and following independence. A statue of William III erected in 1701 on Dublin's College Green was removed in 1929, a stone likeness of William II installed in 1736 was destroyed in 1922, and the Duke of Cumberland pillar dating from 1747 was removed in 1915. In 1966, the large granite Nelson's Pillar, commemorating the admiral's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 in Dublin's O'Connell Street, was severely damaged with explosives planted by Republicans, later demolished and replaced by the more abstract design of the aforementioned *Spire*. Similarly, in 1948, a prominent statue of Queen Victoria outside the same parliament building where the 'Anglo Avenger' would later protest, was removed and subsequently stood in an obscure field until being shipped to Sydney, Australia, in 1986.

The destroyed colonial statues have occasionally been replaced by more modest Republican figures but, in general, venerable memorials have not been quite as sacrosanct in Ireland as elsewhere. As Johnson (1995) discusses, before independence, a large statue of proto-nationalist Parnell supplemented that of Nelson in O'Connell Street and following independence, stone and bronze heroes of the struggle appeared across Ireland as part of the postcolonial recuperation of identity. Such programmes may produce their own essentialisms, though as Nash (1999) argues in exploring renaming projects, such

reifications can be sidestepped by adopting more inclusive, multiple approaches that are amenable to debate and contestation. In this context, and moving beyond postcolonial impulses to commemorate, Achill Henge joins those memorial forms whose meanings and worth have been subject to dispute.

The decentring of the authoritative commemorative statue has been recently accompanied by the creation of figurative forms situated at crowd level, or that stand atop a smaller plinth. These less grandiloquent figures usually commemorate musicians, comedian, actors and sports stars. The memorials to Rory Gallagher in Cork, Phil Lynott in Dublin and Gaelic football player and manager, Mick O'Dwyer in Waterville, Kerry are examples. Like Achill Henge, they are part of a larger process that David Atkinson terms the 'democratisation of memory' whereby official forms of commemoration have been supplanted by a 'polyphony of voices that start to weave together a complex, shifting, contingent but continually evolving sense of the past and its abundant component elements' (2008: 385). Since the 1960s, memorial culture has incorporated extremely diverse informal, participatory and vernacular forms of commemoration, as for instance, in the temporary memorial forms and roadside shrines discussed by Maddrell (2013). Many recent memorials are vernacular designs, or tend to be more closely integrated with public space and adopt abstract forms that invite bodily engagement, fostering greater opportunities for individual interpretation and experience (Stevens and Sumartojo, 2015). Like Achill Henge, they do not solicit a distanced gaze but offer opportunities for sensory, physical encounters with materiality. And similarly, as Robertson (2016: 7) points out, such memorials can be 'a means and a manifestation of counter hegemonic practices' and honour those not formerly featured in the public realm, perhaps spurred by the emergence of 'identity politics and government policies of multiculturalism' (Hamilton, 2011: 16). Achill Henge is no clear memorial to a marginalised group, for its creator was one of those to initially benefit from the economic boom. However, as a potent material statement about the need to recall and learn from the 2008 crash, it rebukes the slippery tendencies of the powerful to forget the consequences of their actions.

In commemorating political and financial ineptitude, Achill Henge takes its place in the memorial landscape of Mayo: the area is saturated with inadvertent memorials to the past, not least derelict dwellings abandoned because of persistent poverty, landlordism and rural depopulation. Indeed, three miles from Achill Henge lies the mile-long abandoned village of Slievemore. These unplanned material testimonies resonate with recently installed intentional memorials to the previously disregarded catastrophes of emigration and famine. Best known are the state-sponsored National Famine Memorial at Murrisk, Co. Mayo, wrought by John Behan into the form of a Famine Ship – an overcrowded, filthy 'coffin ship' with skeletons moulded into the rigging (Crowley, 2016) – and the figurative monument commemorating the dozens that perished in the 1849 Doolough Tragedy.

These leitmotifs also feature in the recently initiated *Tír Sáile* project, the North Mayo Sculpture Trail, where largely coastal, site-specific installations evoke themes inspired by ancient human inhabitation, cultural heritage and mythological significance. Eight of these sculptures have been created by Travis Price and his students, as part of his *Spirit of Place, Spirit of Design* course at Washington's Catholic University, USA. Key aims identified by Price are to create monuments that 'evoke enduring primordial wisdom' and respond to 'the

poetic specificity of the culture, mythology and the ecology of place' (Spirit of Place / Spirit of Design). Indeed, Gemma Tipton (2018) reports that Price's students 'approach each site through intensive research into the stories, histories and myths'. *Tír Sáile* intersects with the hugely successful tourist promotion of the *Wild Atlantic Way*, the much advertised 2,500 km route created by the national tourism board, Fáilte Ireland, with its 170 'discovery points'; Achill Henge is not one of these.

Examples from *Tír Sáile* include *The Temple of the Tides*, a cubic stone shelter with glass front erected on a granite platform and surrounded by dozens of vertically arranged stainless-steel pipes. Situated near the shores of Black Sod Bay, from which many emigrated during the famine, it commemorates the sense of loss and longing amongst those left behind. *A Home for the Children of Lir*, situated above vertiginous cliffs, recalls a myth in which children were magically transformed into swans. An open-sided stone shelter covered with an upwardly tilted roof lies adjacent to a wall upon which are installed a series of metallic wind chimes. A plaque explains that, 'as one walks between the sea surf and the wind one hears the music of the Children of Lir chanting the ancient tongues of nature and man'. Other sculptures on the *Tír Sáile* trail commemorate ecological interconnectedness, local legends of giants and magical spells, the natural elements and landscapes, deep time, prehistoric and vernacular building traditions, entwined pagan and Christian histories, loss at sea, and ancient pathways and meeting places (*Tír Sáile: The North Mayo Sculpture Trail*). Tipton (2018) avers that these works 'have firmly located Ireland in a mythic poetic realm'; they resonate with the well-worn romantic, elegiac, and nostalgic desires promoted by the Irish tourist industry. Indeed, Peter Hynes, Mayo's chief executive, confesses 'it's not just art for art's sake, it's a springboard for revival. It's all part of the effort to rebrand the county as a can-do county' (Tipton, 2018).

These officially promoted commemorative sculptural forms certainly adopt the qualities of accessibility, abstraction, and local materiality, and invite bodily engagement and individual interpretation in accord with other contemporary memorials. However, themes of mysticism, loss, and authenticity, and the intention to make the sculptures align with the landscape, are not concerns that informed the creation of Achill Henge. Moreover, their carefully chosen material constituents, designed to harmonise with their settings, contrast with the brute political statement conjured at Achill Henge. Stone, the dominant material element deployed in the *Tír Sáile* project, has been utilised across human history as memorial constituent, with stone circles, cairns, dolmens, pyramids, obelisks and tombs enduring as lithic relics of distant times. Yet stone and bronze, termed by Adrian Forty as 'the traditional materials of dignity and solemnity' (2005: 77), have increasingly been supplemented by other materials, notably steel, glass, and concrete. It is concrete that constitutes the fabric of Achill Henge. Despite its unreadable qualities – unlike stone, it bears little trace of its age, provenance or formation – concrete has been widely used for memorials, most notably with the gigantic commemorative forms wrought in former Yugoslavia and Eisenmann's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Yet such monuments are typically sited in spectacular settings or in symbolic urban centres. By contrast, sited on a desolate bog, Achill Henge's brute, unadorned materiality traduces the notion that a memorial should resonate with and enchant the romantic Irish landscape.



Besides its uncompromising appearance, the Henge is emblematic of the previous construction fervour and the legacy of the piles of unfinished concrete structures and unused components following the financial crash. Its unpopulated setting chimes with the abandoned environments that accommodate these ghost estates. Concrete also offered important practical attributes for a memorial that had to be rapidly erected; its relative cheapness and ready availability meant that the standardised slabs that conformed to the exact geometry of Achill Henge's design could be transported to order. Moreover, concrete's isotropic qualities – it transmits forces equally in all directions – work to solidify the memorial, and its quick-drying properties formed stable foundations on the boggy, almost-fluid peat terrain.

These structural and material properties ensure a lasting durability in this rain- and wind-lashed realm, for concrete does not 'succumb to the same processes of ageing and decay as other materials' (Forty, 2005: 93). This memorial will last. As Forty submits, the combination of durability, cost, and convenience makes concrete one of the true material foundations of our times: such is the substance's material longevity and ubiquity that it is now seen as a reliable material indicator for the 'Anthropocene', alongside plastics, carbon, and plutonium (ibid.). Although first used by the Romans, more than half of the world's 500,000 teragrams (1 Tg = 1 billion kilograms) of concrete has been produced in just the last 20 years (Waters et al., 2016). Concrete is thus ideal in the fashioning of the Henge, with the uniformity of its composite elements imparting an even texture and a sense of monumentality. One visitor recalled that 'It looked unshakeable. It had clearly been inspired by Stonehenge, but it had an eerie contemporaneity because it was made of cold, cheap concrete' (Mahoney, 2012). In its unabashed concrete solidity, dubious legality, unfinished condition and the political message it transmits, Achill Henge resists incorporation into Mayo's tourist product.

Yet the memorial's symbolic meaning is vague, its lack of clarity fostered by McNamara's enigmatic silence since his early intimation that it was a 'tomb of the Celtic tiger'. As a consequence, various myths around its intended eventual shape have emerged. As tourist manager Sean explained, for locals 'It's shrouded in a lot of mystery, no matter who you talk to here, everybody has their own take as to how it was there'. Perhaps the closest to the truth is a local account asserting that a large stone placed in the centre of the Henge was to be carved with inscriptions identifying both heroic Irish figures and those who have harmed the country, notably the politicians and bankers accused of causing the 2008 crisis. Another informant contended that the central point was to contain a light-receptive device that upon being struck by sunlight at the Summer Solstice, would trigger a powerful beam to shine skywards. Although all monuments testify to the futility of their creators' intentions to fix meaning across time, this unfinished protest monument is even less moored by its original symbolic intentions. Accordingly, lacking identifiable inscriptions or symbols, the Henge inspires multiple interpretations and commemorative uses that transcend its original meaning, as with the individual practices of grief and loss performed at the underdetermined sites identified by Maddrell (2013).

As a commemorative form, the Henge belongs with the expanded number of memorials 'from below' that are challenging the legion of bronze and lithic statues of heroic 'great men' and state-sanctioned military monuments. As a distinctly Irish memorial, it also acts as a counter-site that implicitly critiques dominant commemorative practices that peddle

mystical clichés and satiate romantic conceptions about the Irish landscape. The political message it is intended to convey, its marginal site and distinctly unromantic concrete form disavow such idealised notions. Originally conceived as a space to reflect on the demise of the Celtic Tiger, the Henge serves as a commemorative subaltern site ‘for talking and thinking critically *and* creatively about the geographies of our past, present, and future’ (Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017: 305). As a dissident monument to economic failure and governmental ineptitude, the memorial thus offers a powerful reminder of the damage perpetrated by the hubristic designs of state growth policies and get-rich-quick property development schemes.

### **Multiple Creative Practices at Achill Henge: Play, Performance and Protest**

Though Achill Henge was constructed as an alternative space of commemoration, this does not exhaust the ever-evolving meanings and creative appropriations that circulate in and around the site. Because the meanings of the Henge are mutable, open to interpretation and imaginative speculation, the site has become a place of creativity and experimentation. The Henge’s position as a liminal, non-commercial, unregulated and freely accessible space allows such engagement. Furthermore, its openness and porosity make the memorial an inclusive threshold site (Stavrides, 2014) that all may enter, rather than one defined by the codes and values of the state, commercial interests, or alternative political groups. Unlike many tourist or authorised heritage sites, there is no interpretation to guide what key historical or aesthetic elements require attention; visitors are free to make use and meaning of the Henge however they choose. These diverse practices are not contested between users and no dominant visions have emerged to delimit what should take place.

The site’s liminality, in this sense, is enhanced by its location on commonage land. Commonage is particular to Irish upland grazing and Di Falco and van Rensburg (2008: 623) note that this form of common property resource continues to be ‘part of an equitable system of land distribution in view of the marginal nature of agriculture along the western seaboard.’ Originating in the Land Commission’s redistributive mechanisms in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are over 20,000 acres of commonage on Achill Island. The poor-quality land is shared for grazing: a low-intensity, extensive form of land use that afforded time and space for the construction of the Henge. This collective property relationship underpins the problems posed for the Mayo authorities, but also foments its openness as a liminal, category-defying space: it is simultaneously situated in a very public manner – commonage land is accessible to the public and not fenced or divided – while constituting a complex tangle of possession, the property of 656 families.

Unlike other spaces in legal ‘grey areas’ which have been co-opted into place marketing strategies, such as Berlin’s wastelands or Copenhagen’s Freetown Christiania, for instance (Colomb, 2012; Ntounis and Kanellopoulou, 2017), Achill Henge has been ignored by local political and commercial interests, despite drawing visitors from further afield. It thus sidesteps neo-liberal appropriations of creativity (Edensor and Millington, 2018). Its controversial origins and significance mean it has not been incorporated into Mayo’s official tourist product. These factors have deterred any schemes to complete the memorial, landscape the site, or repurpose the structure according to different aesthetic, social, or commercial motivations.

At Achill Henge, then, in the absence of top-down spatial governance, there is much scope for unstructured play, improvisation, and the invention of adventurous and risky games. As Stevens contends, such play occurs when 'people step beyond instrumentality, compulsion, convention, safety and predictability to pursue new and uncertain prospects' (2007: 196). Woodyer's (2012: 319) depiction of play as a 'prioritising of the non-cognitive and more-than-rational' that unleashes improvisational and spontaneous movement seems to be solicited at the site. Besides this, the structure manifests a range of powerful sensory and affective forces; it is extremely durable and resilient to the activities that focus upon it, and its rich material affordances encourage such sensory and playful engagements. Its open-ended structure allows visitors to improvisationally weave in and out of the columns, climb onto its capstones, gravitate towards the centre, circle the memorial on the surrounding banks of earth or view it from a distance. An abundance of entrances, slopes, excess materials, textures and surfaces furnish 'an array of resources useful for the realisation of specific experiences, ambitions and capacities' (Duff, 2010: 882).

In the absence of health and safety measures and means for their enforcement, risky endeavours can be performed. The liminal site allows unfettered, expressive, vital play, providing a greater sense of challenge and of being outside a system of functional and segmented spaces in which particular activities are delineated (Brown, 2014). April 2012, for instance, saw a video released of a man cycling around the top surface of the Henge, having somehow scaled the monument with his bike in hand; the solidity of the memorial and the smooth circular pathway constituted by the capstones inviting this possibility. Such practices contrast with those of skateboarders, exponents of parkour, and graffiti artists who opportunistically subvert the usual meanings of space (Woodyer, 2012), for the site lacks such normative assignments.

Numerous other improvisational creative practices focus on the site. Gardening has been attempted and visitors are guided to the memorial via homemade signposts. When we visited the Henge, in the absence of the planned centrepiece, a raised wall of peat ringed with a low stone wall had been assembled to mark the monument's heart (Figure 1). As Sean details, 'I go up there every 2 or 3 months... the middle changes all the time. People are putting their own kind of take on it ... different stones in different formations... and sometimes the bank that's left there is completely cleared and then it goes back'. The multiple fragments of stone and concrete that surround the Henge constitute potential building materials for ad hoc structures, and outside the circle, pictograms, slogans and names designed out of this excess material disappear and reappear. This ludic, vernacular creativity (Edensor and Millington, 2018), supplements more sustained artistic involvements.

The affordances that promote improvisational play also prompt a host of more focused creative and political performances at Achill Henge. For instance, the site has become a venue for visual artistic expression. The concrete surface, devoid of the idiosyncratic strata, fossils, or cooled magma typically found on stone, with each pillar equally featureless, acts as a blank canvas, affording opportunities for artwork and graffiti to stand out against the plain background. Visual artists have used the monument's impressive scale for both temporary and longer-lasting installations. The interior face of the Henge has long been

dominated by a zoetrope of an eye, of little-known provenance, that gradually emerges along the surfaces of the inner circle of columns (Figure 2; see Graffiti Zoetrope, Achill Henge).

[Insert Figure 1]

[Insert Figure 2]

These material and aesthetic affordances, together with the dynamic light that swirls around its desolate setting, have attracted those who seek to film and video the site. There is much online video footage taken by drone and kite, and more conventional digital photography, including local photographer Michael McLaughlin's front-page image on *The Irish Times* immediately following the Henge's construction. McLaughlin has also created a 'light painting' of the memorial. National television crews and comedian John Bishop have filmed footage at the site, and footage of members of the band Soul Badger performing there also appears in a music video.

Other performances have been inspired by the Henge's particular sonic affordances (O'Connor, 2008) whereupon entering the interior of the concrete circle, a sense of quiet descends; the howling of the wind is dampened, and elements of the acoustic environment such as bird song become accentuated. One participant, speaking in *Achill Unhinged* (see below), reflected on her sense of entering this sonic sanctuary:

I wasn't expecting to like it but, as I walked up to it, I really liked how it sat into the landscape. And when I walked in, I was amazed at the containment of it and the peacefulness of it, it felt like a very strong place.

This unique soundscape is most striking, however, due to a minutely delayed echo; an utterance in the middle of this amphitheatre immediately fills one's ears with one's own voice, enhancing the circle's focal nature and creating a theatrical centre. Notable acoustics are a feature of many circular structures, such as the 'whispering gallery effect' at London's St Paul's Cathedral, with Watson and Keating (1999: 335–336) arguing that the diffracting of sound waves at megalithic monuments could have formed a crucial part of their use, concluding that acoustics should be increasingly considered 'alongside the structural, spatial, or visual attributes'. They speculate that such places 'may not have been simply a technology for producing visual and acoustic experiences, but a means of creating different worlds altogether' (p. 336). Till (2011: 12) concurs, holding that acoustic modelling reveals that 'Stonehenge had a remarkably high level of envelopment, and that those inside would feel surrounded by, enclosed by, and included within, the sound and acoustic of the space'.

These sonic qualities foreground Achill Henge's utility for advancing knowledge in the field of archaeo-acoustics. To explore the potential sonic role of ancient stone circles, European experimental archaeologists currently must go to the Maryhill Stonehenge in Washington State (Fazenda and Drumm, 2013), a replica built in 1929 as a memorial to the fallen of World War One. As classically trained musician and computer scientist Richard Brock

asserts, 'Achill-henge is much easier to access for European researchers, is better constructed than the Maryhill version and could become a key site in the growing field of archaeo-acoustics' and related experimental archaeological research (Moynihan, 2012). These acoustic attributes have drawn musical performers who have experimented with both ancient and modern instruments. These include a performance by a local folk singer, a demonstration of Mongolian throat singing or overtone chanting, and a shamanistic ritual of native American drumming and singing by a new age visitor from Iceland. It is rumoured that a colleague of famed DJ Carl Cox may record or stage an event at the site in the near future. New Age associations have inspired other groups to gather to discover whether the Henge was designed to admit the rays of the rising sun at the winter solstice, and couples have enquired into the possibility of staging marriage ceremonies.

A less unrestrained practice enacted at Achill Henge, perhaps most significantly for local inhabitants, is that the site has acquired fluctuating significance as an unofficial tourist attraction. Despite the reluctance of local tourist authorities to promote the Henge, for fear of governmental sanction, it has become cherished as a curious spectacle worth visiting. The proprietor of a local cafe told us that for the first few years after its completion, each day during the summer season, tourists would enter the cafe enquiring as to its whereabouts, bringing much-needed business. In 2016, the Henge was indicated as a key site on a map for motorcycle tourists, resulting in an increase in visits to the area. Other individuals also enfold the site into their itineraries as a key destination. For instance, local walking guide, Derek, brings groups of predominantly American and German tourists to the Henge. He explains that:

I take people to the Henge as a matter of point... I bring flags up there, the American flag, the French flag, whatever group I'm with, put the flag in the middle... People are absolutely blown away by it. We had a group, they were kite-surfing down on that beach. They asked, 'What's the Henge like?' I said 'Well, you know Stonehenge, it's sort of like a modern version, but not quite'. They were blown away: 'Wow, why isn't this on tourist maps?'

The often highly regulated conventions of tourism are loosened here by a more sensory, affective, immersive and expressive approach to visiting places. There are no information boards, official potted narratives or security guards, and like other visitors, tourists may carry out whatever practise they choose.

Though these tourist performances exemplify how the playful and the performative are often more concerned with 'experiencing vitality rather than strategic oppositional endeavour' (Woodyer, 2012: 318), the Henge also serves as a liminal stage at which political enactments are filmed, photographed or unrecorded. In June 2013, a group of feminist activists led by the Galway Pussy Riot staged a series of theatrical, carnivalesque protest interventions there, expressing outrage towards the banks and neoliberal capitalist ruin, coinciding with a summit of the G8, held in Fermanagh, Ireland. Described as an 'act of the Holy Foolishness of Punk', one organiser – the renowned 84-year-old actress, playwright and activist, Margaretta D'Arcy – justified the choice of venue in an interview by stating 'we felt we should have identification with what [McNamara] was doing with the Henge up in Mayo... It's an astonishing monument and should stay because of what was happening in

Ireland at the time.’ The action, and complementary protests in Galway’s urban centre, was captured in the (quasi-surrealist) documentary *Achill Unhinged*, subsequently screened at the Galway Film Fleadh and Portobello Film Festival, London. As with other performances staged at the Henge, while escaping direct surveillance, the activists gained visible exposure through recording and transmitting their acts via social media.

The use of graffiti has also often expressed messages of protest, including explicit support for its creation in phrases such as ‘Lest We Forget’. Famously, artist and teacher Joe Caslin used the Henge’s outer surfaces as part of his series of installations across urban and rural Ireland, called *Our Nation’s Sons* (Figure 1). The stark black-and-white illustrations of young men on sheets of paper, pasted onto the surfaces of the columns, were intended to spark conversations about mental health, suicide, and youth marginalization. These striking images resonated with Achill’s own tales of historic and present disenfranchisement, economic stagnation, and population decline.

As we have emphasised, these multiple creative practices are solicited by the rich affordances of the Henge, but also by the freedom to play, film, inscribe, tour and sculpt as people wish. The lack of surveillance underpins the advantages that such productive activities take place in a marginal setting, beyond the city centres, arts districts and cultural quarters inhabited by the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2005). This further emphasises that creativity must be more expansively conceived to transcend the instrumental and reductive understanding that focuses on the ‘creative economy’ and the ‘cultural industries’, where the value of creativity remains tethered to its capacity to bolster economic development and urban renewal. Creativity can instead be sustained by other values such as generosity, social collaboration, care and reciprocity (Hallam and Ingold, 2007). At Achill Henge, playful creative practices strengthen individual and collective capacities, transmit political messages and produce novel cultural forms and practices. Such practices are not akin to the much-vaunted forms of tactical urbanism often proposed as a creative political and experimental place-making interventions. Indeed, Mould (2014) argues that flash-mobbing, yarn bombing, pop-up shops and guerrilla gardening emblematic of such tactics prove susceptible to incorporation by urban marketing strategies, and thus their critical potential is diminished. In a liminal site like Achill Henge, such co-optation has not occurred.

## Conclusion

Mayo council were aghast at the erection of Achill Henge and sought to have it demolished. When awareness about the huge memorial first dawned on locals, many were equally disdainful. Local journalist, Edwin, related that complaints focused on rumours about the high cost of the structure, the violation of commonage, and the individualistic, unilateral nature of this expression of political anger. Yet, seven years later, with intense media focus long over, our interviewees revealed that these negative opinions have diminished and the site has gained significant local support. Tourist manager Sean admitted, ‘I’d hate to see it go, to be honest. The feeling is a lot warmer to it than it was a few years ago. No doubt about that’. Tourist guide Derek was more fulsome in his disdain at the potential for its demolition: ‘Mayo County Council, I think they want it just knocked (down), but what’s the bloody point?... It’s pathetic.’

Photographer Mick was also enthusiastic about the Henge's positive qualities: 'As a piece of performance art, or a public installation... It's testament to the ghost estates, the building boom, the raw material that fucking built this... I don't think it could be more perfect. It's not an eyesore within the landscape... It's still kind of stirring people's imaginations.' Likewise, Margaretta eloquently championed the memorial:

I personally think it's an astonishing monument and should stay because of what was happening in Ireland at that time. I like the fact that he actually openly displayed his anger, because no one else in the country was doing that... This artist has made the most significant piece of brutal art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, signifying and symbolising the total disgust and destruction of the Celtic Tiger... The acoustics are perfect, there are hardly any open spaces for performing political art in the country. This is a space that can be used for the good.'

We have emphasised its virtues as a rare memorial to the excesses of growth and capital, a crucial role given the subsequent erasure of many ghost estates from the landscape. In situating this controversial structure in its spatial, historical and cultural context, we have outlined that along with a growing polyphony of memorial forms, it moves away from figurative representations of esteemed men, warriors and tragic events, and from romantic commemoration of myth, loss and nostalgia. Achill Henge, we suggest, articulates the notion that, like the ruins and the ghost estates which it echoes, memorials can 'become forces for mobilizing and materializing collective anger and resistance' (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013: 468). As property prices in Ireland, at the time of writing, rise once more, and the economic hegemony of growth and multinational capital appears unquestioned, we contend that such forces are sorely needed.

We have also productively focused on the Henge's utility as a site defined by 'democratic openness' (Maddrell, 2009: 681), and how its particularly rich affordances have encouraged a plethora of practices. Many are playful, and though play is often regarded as infantile or frivolous, it can be 'a vehicle for becoming conscious of those things and relationships that we would otherwise enact or engage without thinking'; moreover, play can be 'an area ripe for rupture, sparks of insight and moments of invention, which present us with ways to be 'otherwise'. (Woodyer, 2012: 322). The Henge might be considered as a *loose space* (Franck and Stevens, 2007), a deterritorialised realm, or a species of 'found space' (Unt et al, 2014) which is underdetermined in meaning and function. Though explorations of the intersection between geographical scholarship and creative practice have been critiqued as lacking a political potency, more recent work has explored 'the potentialities of arts practices with respect to socio-political transformations' (Marston and Leeuw, 2013: xiii). In this context, we argue that this unregulated counter-space is open to a wealth of creative practices that may transcend the limits to action and thought in more prescriptive, less remote settings, fostering improvisational and playful responses that take place in the moment, often without prior agendas (Dyson and Jeffreys, 2018). This is crucial to fostering experimentation, conviviality, and expression; it serves as a prefigurative venue *enabling* altered outlooks on hegemonic political and economic rationalities to emerge (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010).

Throughout, we have followed other geographers in examining liminality (see McConnell, 2017, for an overview), specifically considering the virtues of the Henge as a liminal space. In moving away from the functionalist assumptions of Turner's (1969) conception wherein those entering liminal time and space are subsequently reassimilated into the social, we have focused on the Henge's potential as a marginal site in which to *develop* ongoing, unstable political identities. As Shields (1991: 84) notes, 'Liminality represents a liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life because of its interstitial nature'. While contemporary examinations of liminal spaces have focused on interstitial urban realms in which migrants, revolutionaries and activists express identities and plot, this more distant rural location offers considerable levels of 'comfort, secludedness and invisibility' (Swerts, 2017: 384) that facilitate uninterrupted experimentation and expression away from the surveillance of onlookers and authorities.

Swerts (2017: 382) asserts that, besides overt public protests, 'the spatial practices that take place out of sight and that forego these public stagings are equally important to grasp processes of political subject formation'. These new performances, political expressions and understandings emerge in a world in which protest and dissent is increasingly regulated, permitted, and confined to particular controlled spaces (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005). The creative, artistic and theatrical performances we have identified can serve as rehearsals for more visible stagings of public protest or subsequent transmission via social media. A marginal, unpoliced, unfinished, richly textured and indeterminate site such as Achill Henge therefore offers the potential to inspire alternative understandings of place, memory and political activity.

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